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The pushback against China: Now, the European Union has released its own Indo-Pacific strategy too

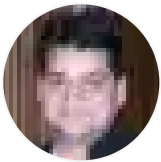
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Till a few months back, China's rise was taken as a given. It still is in many ways. China is a rising economic and political power and it's pointless to talk about preventing that from happening. But how China rises certainly can be managed so that it causes least disruption in the global

The disorder ushered in by Covid-19 has underlined to the world the need of giving China a free pass. And in response, the world has galvanized. Pushback against China has been manifesting itself in multiple ways. In particular, regional players have been pursuing more coordinated strategies so as to create a more stable balance of power.

This pushback has also emerged in the context of the BRI, the signature project of Chinese President Xi Jinping. This week saw the government of Australia using new powers to cancel two deals between the state of Victoria and China related to the BRI. While argued that the move was essential to protect Australia's national Beijing made it clear that the action by Canberra was "bound to further damage to bilateral relations, and will only end up hurting



Illustration: Uday Deb

A new front has been added to an already strained Australia-China relationship ever since Australia demanded an investigation into origins of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. At the other end of the spectrum, China was targeted in a different way when a bomb exploded at a luxury hotel in the Pakistani city of Quetta, the capital of Baloch province, ended up killing five people and wounding several others.

China's ambassador who was visiting the region was ostensibly targeted of this attack by the Pakistani Taliban, who claimed responsibility

Tensions have been rising in Balochistan, where China and Pakistan government are viewed as culprits for exploiting one of the country's poorest regions for its natural resources.

The BRI is facing challenges at a time when the Indo-Pacific narrative is getting well-established across the world. The EU released its Indo-Pacific strategy which aims for “regional stability, security, prosperity, and sustainable development” at a time of great regional flux and turbulence.

Arguing that its approach and engagement will look to foster a rules-based international order, a level playing field as well as an open environment for trade and investment, reciprocity, the strengthening of resilience and tackling climate change, the EU strategy calls upon nations to group together “to work together with its partners in the Indo-Pacific on these issues of common interest”.

After ignoring the Indo-Pacific construct for years, the EU seems to have finally realised the need to imbibe it within its own strategic framework. As it seeks a new global role for itself as a geopolitical actor. Individual member states such as France, Germany and even the Netherlands have already taken the plunge and so the EU had to respond to the evolving geopolitical realities.

From Europe and the US all the way to the Asean and Oceania, the Indo-Pacific is the new geostrategic reality which cannot be ignored. China employed its entire might in trying to discredit the narrative, and it turned out to be one of the most significant diplomatic failures of Beijing. It could not prevent the ideational rise and operational establishment of the new maritime geography.

Today, China is left with only Russian support on this issue while the rest of the world has moved on. And India's role has been central in making the idea of Indo-Pacific a reality. Much as New Delhi's response to the BRI are now the standard template for responding to the project around the world, without New Delhi's persistence and active engagement in shoring up the viability of the Indo-Pacific, the idea would have found it difficult to move beyond academic discourse.



And this effort continues with the external affairs minister S Jaish recently again underlining that the Indo-Pacific refers to a seam which was historically present in the form of Indian-Arab economic trading ties and cultural influences from Asean nations like Vietnam to the east coast of China. In this context, “the Indo-Pacific is a return to history” and “is actually the overcoming of the Cold War and not reinforcing it”.

The more China has pushed its belligerent agenda on regional states, the more pushback it has begun to face. The BRI is confronted with its own fault lines; the Indo-Pacific geography is now more well-established than ever; the Quad has been resurrected; and various regional players are beginning to engage with each other much more cohesively.

Power is as much about a nation’s innate capabilities as it is about the ability to make others accept its leadership. China has certainly risen to the top of the world in the last decade but it has not succeeded in making others accept its claim for even regional – forget global – leadership.

And India’s ability to stand steadfast vis-à-vis China across multiple challenges has given other nations greater confidence in their ability to shape Chinese behaviour. It may or may not work in the end in rationalising China’s role. But it will certainly force the Chinese Communist Party to rethink some of the assumptions underlying their policy preferences.

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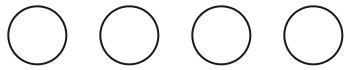
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